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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABUJA 000481

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TAGS: PGOV PREL NI

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: AMBASSADOR MEETS FORMER HEAD OF STATE  
GENERAL ABDULSALAMI ABUBAKAR

Classified By: Ambassador Robin R. Sanders for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶11. (C) Summary: On March 16, the Ambassador (Poloff notetaker) met with former Nigerian military Head of State from 1998 to 1999, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, at his residence, to discuss his views on Nigeria's democratic performance, particularly as in regard to the recent Electoral Reform Commission (ERC) recommendations and what challenges there might be going forward toward the 2011 election. When asked for a report card on Nigeria's democratic progress since he was in office, Abdulsalami responded: "slightly above average," but noted there are still many problems to deal with, such as improving the electoral process and lack of democracy within the political party system. The General said he was hopeful President Yar'Adua would implement many of the ERC recommendations; but cautioned that in some cases it may not be possible. Citing the ERC recommendation for the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Chairman to be appointed by the National Judicial Commission (NJC) rather than the President, Abdulsalami first agreed with the current position of the GON that NJC should not decide the INEC Chairmanship. He also noted that anything that requires a constitutional amendment such as this would not happen before the next election. In an off-the-record comment, however, Abdulsalami shared his belief that current INEC Chairman Maurice Iwu should be removed in order to "restore confidence" amongst the people in INEC as an institution. Abdulsalami also noted the risk of increased violence during the lead-up to the next election if the problems with INEC were not resolved. In response to the Ambassador's inquiry, the General admitted there has been some evidence of factions forming within the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) in preparation for the 2011 elections, but cautioned that there will be a lot of "realigning" over the next two years. He added that the politicians will continue to shift alliances in search of power, and suggested that Nigeria's democracy needs a "strong opposition;" otherwise the ruling party will continue to have the upper hand.

¶12. (C) Summary cont'd: Asked to assess the current risk of a coup, Abdulsalami said the military was unlikely to undertake one unless instigated and funded by politicians, but he acknowledged this could happen over a much longer term if things do not improve. The Ambassador also discussed the Niger Delta with the General who said the biggest challenge

was lack of leadership in the villages, and suggested a potential oil embargo to cut down on illegal bunkering and violence. Ambassador told Abdulsalami about the joint USG/UK efforts to assist the GON in the Niger Delta, and also highlighted the Mission's robust military assistance program and grassroots capacity building programs. On Yar'Adua, the General added his voice to the overall disappointment that not much has been accomplished since the 2007 election, underscoring that between now and 2011 Nigeria will continue to be adrift. End Summary.

¶3. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Poloff (notetaker) met with former Nigerian Head of State General Abdulsalami Abubakar on March 16. The Ambassador began by noting that she was the NSC Africa Director in 1998 when Abdulsalami took office, and remembered him as a pillar of the effort to restore democracy. Ambassador asked the General his views on where Nigeria is, and where it is headed (including his views on the potential for a coup), particularly in regards to the recent recommendations in the ERC report. Abdulsalami responded that, although Nigeria had come a long way since 1999, there was still a lot to be done, especially on electoral reform. The laws currently in existence, however, were not the problem according to Abdulsalami, but rather the implementation of the laws. He began by commenting that more transparency was needed in the electoral process and that those who attempted to manipulate elections must be punished as a deterrent. Abdulsalami added that in order to punish perpetrators of vote rigging, the security services must be sensitized and staffed with people who cannot be bought. Then he turned to discussing the Independent National

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Electoral Commission (INEC) as the real driver of electoral lack of confidence.

¶4. (C) On INEC he stressed that it was the biggest obstacle to electoral reform noting the political links between the President and INEC members. Abdulsalami said he hoped President Yar'Adua would accept and implement the ERC's recommendations, but added that if the President did not accept certain reforms, it could be for good reasons. Ambassador noted the recent outcry from stakeholders and civil society about the Federal Executive Council's (the GON cabinet) rejection of the recommendation that the National Judicial Commission (NJC), rather than the President, oversee appointment of the INEC Chairman and his deputy. Abdulsalami noted first that the recommendation would require a constitutional amendment, since the constitution as written is explicit on the point as to who has the power to appoint the INEC Chair. Abdulsalami, also agreeing with the FEC, that putting the power to appoint the INEC Chair in the hands of the NJC is an executive decision, and also would not necessarily solve the problem, as the President if he wants can influence them as well as he appoints the members of the NJC. Ambassador stressed the importance of political independence and asked, off the record, if Abdulsalami thought current INEC Chairman Maurice Iwu should be replaced, to which the General responded "yes," if only to "restore confidence" amongst the general public who are well aware of INEC's failings. Ambassador concurred that people were unhappy with the current state of INEC and inquired about what that might portend for the 2011 election. Abdulsalami predicted a possible increase in "militancy" or people standing up to those trying to steal votes, which he agreed would likely lead to violence if the INEC situation were not resolved. He added that a number of the ERC's recommendations require constitutional amendments, such as who appoints the INEC Chair, which he did not see happening before the 2011 election.

¶5. (C) When asked for a "report card" on Nigeria's democratic progress since his time in office, Abdulsalami responded "slightly above average," despite the problems still faced. Abdulsalami added that the lack of democracy within political parties remains one of the biggest obstacles, lamenting the

fact that candidates continue to be imposed rather than elected. The General suggested that a "strong opposition" party might improve the democratic process, otherwise the ruling party would always have the upper hand. The Ambassador inquired about reports on the activity of political camps within the ruling party already aligning themselves in preparation for the 2011 election. Abdulsalami replied that "we have not seen the end" of that yet, as politicians will continue to change alliances in search of power. He added that there will be a great deal of "realigning" over the next two years, and what we see now is likely to change.

¶ 16. (C) In light of the country's current difficulties, the Ambassador asked Abdulsalami for his thoughts on the potential for a coup. The General concurred that there are people who believe Nigeria was better off under military rule, especially due to the current lack of direction, but he insisted that the military does not just wake up one day and decide to launch a coup. He said it is the politicians who instigate, and ultimately fund, such a thing. He admitted some fears of that possibility if things continued the way they are going. Ambassador asked for clarity on this issue given what seemed contradictory as regards to his "above average" assessment earlier in Nigeria's democracy report card. Abdulsalami said he understood how this could seem contradictory, but in his view Nigerian's may "shout and make noise" about things, but they ultimately "tolerate the government."

¶ 17. (C) The Ambassador turned the conversation to the Niger Delta. Abdulsalami said the biggest challenge was the lack of leadership in the villages and various levels of government. According to Abdulsalami, the federal and state

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governments were now working together to bring employment and development to the region. He maintained that since the militancy was no longer based on political ideas, but rather about money, creating alternative income opportunities could help cut down on the violence. The General then suggested that international partners could do more, such as an oil embargo similar to the one placed on South Africa during apartheid. Ambassador responded by outlining efforts that both the U.S. and British governments are making to assist the GON, and told the General about a joint meeting with British High Commissioner and the Niger Delta Minister and how they outlined once again what type of assistance both countries could provide. Ambassador explained that the UK offered assistance with an identification system that could determine the origin of the oil, while the U.S. had shared a private sector option that could help with electronic bills of lading that would help trace legal oil shipments. The Ambassador added that both the UK and U.S. are still waiting for a response, but will continue to engage the GON both bilaterally and multilaterally.

¶ 18. (C) The Ambassador thanked the General for sharing his thoughts and asked if he had any questions for her. Abdulsalami inquired about what the U.S. was doing in the areas of empowering civil society to fulfill their watchdog role, and about military assistance. The General stressed how lucky he was that a majority of his military training took place in the U.S. and he would like to see that happen for other young officers. Highlighting the current Africa Partnership Station training taking place on the USS Nashville in Lagos, the Ambassador explained that the Mission's robust mil-to-mil program offered both training and equipment. Ambassador added her hope that the troops trained by the U.S. to participate in peacekeeping operations would soon depart for Somalia as promised by the GON. On empowering civil society, the Ambassador told Abdulsalami that the U.S. funded capacity building programs at the local level, met often with our civil society partners, including holding two NGO forums, and did a great deal of work with women's groups and training women in political parties.

Ambassador also noted the Framework for Partnership developed by the Mission to support the GON 7-Point Agenda.

¶9. (C) Comment: Although Abdulsalami refers to Nigerians as tolerant, his points and scenario under which the potential for a coup would occur should be noted and we will be monitoring these signs. Equally worrisome is his concern about election-related localized violence in states and local government areas leading up to the 2011 campaign considering the lack of progress on electoral reform. Each day that goes by makes it more unlikely that the key ERC recommendations will be implemented, especially those requiring constitutional amendment. As Abdulsalami confirmed, political camps are already starting to emerge in preparation for the 2011 elections and we will continue to monitor the networks and personalities as they evolve over the coming year. As we will note septel, there is evidence in both the North and South that political campaigns, the search for godfathers, and factional realignment has already begun. Septel analyzing the current pre-election atmospherics is also forthcoming. End Comment.

¶10. (U) This cable was coordinated with Consulate Lagos.  
SANDERS